

Testimony on H.B. 5037

(Comm) An Act Adjusting the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023

Appropriations Committee

February 24, 2022

Good afternoon, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Hartley, Representative Dathan, Representative Nolan, Senator Miner, Representative France and other esteemed Committee members. My name is Win Evarts and I live with my wife and 31-year-old son in Norwalk, CT. Our son, Nick, has an intellectual disability and an intractable seizure condition. I'm also the Executive Director of The Arc Connecticut, the state's oldest and largest advocacy organization dedicated to protecting the rights of individuals with intellectual disabilities (IDD) and promoting opportunities for their inclusion in the full life of their communities.

Connecticut's safety net is in tatters as a result of the pandemic and long-term underfunding and it needs additional investment. The pandemic brought health fears directly into everyone's workplace and, for the IDD community, COVID-19 radically changed the way care and support are delivered and the relationships between support staff and the individuals they support.

Direct support personnel work with complex individuals for long hours in regularly close quarters at an hourly rate that has rarely been at a significant premium to the state's minimum wage and it is hard work. Should we be surprised that a pandemic has caused some of those individuals to stop doing multiple shifts or leave entirely? In addition, when the state has raised wages, it has regularly resulted in increases for the least experienced personnel and little to no increases for experienced and supervising personnel.

This poor practice of wage compression is nearly nationwide and must be addressed because it is devaluing to direct support professionals and detrimental to creating a profession. It is a primary driver of the double-digit staff turnover rates that have plagued human service providers and the individuals they support for decades.

Connecticut's health and human service providers have tried to support individuals needing services throughout the pandemic. They have been responsive to a wide array of need through innovation and have evolved their programming to match the conditions in their communities. But they can't continue to be responsive to present needs, never mind future needs, without well-trained and experienced staff of which they are now critically short. The same is true for families that self-direct their services; it's very, very hard to hire and/or keep support staff with skills and experience in many parts of the state at \$16.25 an hour when large retailers and distribution companies will pay \$20 an hour or higher for people with minimal skills.

The pandemic also brought increased isolation to individuals living in group homes and family homes as the fear of contagious infection resulted in significantly lower social contact (including some complete lockdowns) than the pre-pandemic era. For our family, our son's expressive language and meaningful community involvement with the ultimate goal of a paying job have been set back. Without the ability for his provider or ourselves to hire staff, Nick's path to working, contributing to, and being embraced by his community will be delayed.

Further, for families where both parents work and there's a young or older adult with IDD in the household staying home from their program, the juggling gets difficult quickly. And the juggling over the last two years has been significant. Disability doesn't discriminate. The median household income in Connecticut is \$78,000, a loss of a job to stay home with a loved one costs a household dearly. Staffing direct supports across the safety net will be a critical need in order to experience a full recovery from the pandemic.

Please support additional funding of \$150 million for Connecticut's safety net. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in our democracy.

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